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ABSTRACT

This report describes research on current assessment procedures affecting educational instruction. The targeted population consisted of third and fifth grade students, teachers, administrators, local school board members, and parents from one highly populated metropolitan public elementary school and a small suburban public elementary school near a major metropolitan city. Analysis of probable cause data revealed that when surveyed, students and teachers exposed that a heavy emphasis has been placed on student standardized test performance. Several underlying causes for an emphasis on current assessment procedures were found. As the tests have become more important in lawmakers' eyes, the practice of teaching to the test has also increased dramatically. School personnel want students to succeed and reveal what they know on the tests. A review of the literature makes it apparent that the assessment issue continues to be heavily debated. Education and educational reform are major issues. Often educators find themselves torn between assessment for accountability and the need for assessment to improve instruction. Existence of this problem became evident through personal interviews. The interviews consisted of teachers, parents, local school board members, and administrators. Standardized tests have affected many different people in a variety of ways; however, the predominant weight of this problem still seems to fall back on the teacher. This may be the ultimate reason why teachers teach to the test. In conclusion, it can be noted that testing provides schools with information, which can be helpful in making decisions relevant to student achievement. Although current approaches to assessment have become limited, results from this study suggest that opportunities can be developed where students will gain ownership of and insight about their own learning, thus providing teachers with a rich basis for making professional judgments about instruction. Contains 18 references and 2 tables of data. Appendixes contain teacher and student surveys. (Author/RS)

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EMPHASIS PLACED ON CURRENT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES AFFECTS THE WAY TEACHERS TEACH

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Reading

Saint Xavier University

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....iii

CHAPTER 1 - PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT.....1

General Statement of the Problem.....1

The Surrounding Community.....2

National Context of the Problem.....4

CHAPTER 2 - PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION.....5

Problem Evidence.....5

Probable Causes.....11

CHAPTER 3 - REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....15

CHAPTER 4 - ANALYSIS OF GATHERED DATA.....23

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....29

Conclusions.....29

Recommendations.....30

REFERENCES.....33

APPENDICES.....35

Appendix A.....35

Appendix B.....36

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Authors: Tracy Bickham, Patti Burns, Dorothy Monahan

ABSTRACT

This report describes research on current assessment procedures affecting educational instruction. The targeted population consisted of third and fifth grade students, teachers, administrators, local school board members, and parents from one highly populated metropolitan public elementary school and a small suburban public elementary school near a major metropolitan city.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed that when surveyed, students and teachers exposed that a heavy emphasis has been placed on student standardized test performance. Several underlying causes for an emphasis on current assessment procedures were found. As the tests have become more important in lawmaker's eyes, the practice of teaching to the test has also increased dramatically. School personnel want students to succeed and reveal what they know on the tests.

A review of the literature makes it apparent that the assessment issue continues to be heavily debated. Education and educational reform are major issues. Often educators find themselves torn between assessment for accountability and the need for assessment to improve instruction.

Existence of this problem became evident through personal interviews. The interviews consisted of teachers, parents, local school board members, and administrators. Standardized tests have affected many different people in a variety of ways; however, the predominant weight of this problem still seems to fall back on the teacher. This may be the ultimate reason why teachers teach to the test.

In conclusion, it can be noted that testing provides schools with information, which can be helpful in making decisions relevant to student achievement. Although current approaches to assessment have become limited, it is the researcher's belief that opportunities can be developed where students will gain ownership of and insight about their own learning, thus providing teachers with a rich basis for making professional judgments about instruction.

CHAPTER 1

DO ASSESSMENTS AFFECT THE WAY EDUCATORS TEACH?

General Statement of the Problem

The emphasis on current assessment procedures affects the way teachers teach. Evidence for the existence of this problem includes teacher and student surveys, historical research on assessments, and personal interviews.

Immediate Problem Context

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between instruction and the emphasis placed on current assessment procedures.

Site A

Targeted school "A" was a highly populated metropolitan public elementary school. The student population was 1,766. The demographics of the student population was 91.9% Hispanic, 7% White, 1% Other. Attendance records of the student population was 93%. On average, class size ranged from 28 to 35 students. Students had a 33.4% mobility rate. Overall, the truancy problem was reported to be minimal. Instructional expenditures for each student were $4,718.00. School "A" employed approximately 100 teachers, of which 45% were White, 41.1% Black, 11% Hispanic, 3% Other. Fifty-four percent of the teachers held bachelor's degrees,

while 45% held master's degrees or above. The average teaching experience at the school was 14.8 years.

Site B

Targeted school "B" was a small suburban public elementary school near a major metropolitan city. The student populace consisted of 85% White children, 7% Black, and 8% other, for a total population of 403 students. The attendance record of the student population was 95%. Student mobility rate was 7%. Class size ranged from 18 students to 23. Instructional expenditure for each student was $3,202.00. Site B faculty consisted of 20 White teachers with an average teaching experience of 11.4 years. About 38% of those teachers held bachelor's degrees while 62% held master's degrees or above.

The Surrounding Community

Site A

A local school council that consisted of two teacher representatives, two community representatives, four parents, and the principal had jurisdiction over the school. The area was, at one time, a sizable Catholic community with a variety of private schools and churches to attend. Due to a dramatic change in demographics the Catholic schools were forced to close and subsequently rented out by the local public schools. However, the community remained highly Catholic orientated. Consequently, the public schools had an overcrowding issue. Many classrooms had more than the recommended number of students allowed by the city union code. A majority of the children were bilingual and were transferred to monolingual classrooms after three years in a bilingual program. Technology was at a minimum

for the enrolled students; however, a plan was in effect to improve the technology department of the school. This public school had a high staff turnover rate. Over the past four years, the school had five different principals. In addition, many teachers transferred to other schools mid-year. Despite faculty turnover, the school was able to provide extra learning opportunities for the children. An extended school day was established starting in October and ending in April in an attempt to increase standardized test scores. The school also hosted over 10 remedial and enrichment summer school programs. The surrounding community added to the overall atmosphere of the school. Ninety-three percent of the families were of low-income status and the school parents were generally uneducated laborers. The Department of Family Services had several cases in the community, which seeped into the school. Gang violence also plagued the area. During the 1999 school year, gang rivals shot two students. Many of the children lived in extended family situations or single parent homes. Yet, the family unit was strong. The majority of parents and guardians were supportive and respectful of teachers and administrators. Cultural differences played a major role in the school and community. Teachers and Administrators learned to celebrate and respect the culture that surrounded the school.

Site B

School "B" was a small suburban school controlled by the local school board and the district superintendent. Socioeconomic indicators listed 11.1% of the community having low-income status. Middle class families with dual incomes represented the remaining population. Unfortunately, the dual income status of these

families resulted in limited parental support. The student population in the surrounding community was divided among several public and private institutions. Due to a recent increase of lower income families, a greater burden had been placed on the public schools resulting in overcrowding. Regardless of the community burden, the school enjoyed increased technological developments and on-site teacher training seminars. In addition to those, recent grant funds significantly increased staff member support.

National Context of the Problem

The problem of emphasis placed on current assessment procedures affecting the way teachers teach had generated concern at the state and national levels. Current literature suggested that some researchers believed the more time teachers spent preparing for and administering standardized tests, the less time teachers spent on authentic teaching (Neill, 1998). Another source indicated that holding educators liable for reading tests as they now exist might have had harmful side effects on the students. Teachers may have been tempted to teach to the test, not in the fraudulent sense of giving answers to the particular test items, but in the sense of carefully preparing students for tests they were expected to pass (National Academy of Education, 1985).

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The goal of this project was to unveil some of the ways in which the pressures of current assessment practices might endanger or compromise excellence in teaching. In an attempt to delve into these issues, the researchers conducted a survey of selected educators and students. All of the participants in this survey were members of a major metropolitan public elementary school and a suburban public elementary school near a major metropolis. Approximately 53% of the staff members surveyed in the study had a master's degree or better. The student body consisted of third and fifth grade students from both schools. No incentives were offered to either students or teachers for their responses. In all, 200 surveys were distributed. Out of the 200 surveys, 150 were representative of student opinion, and 50 were representative of teacher opinion.

The student survey was comprised of ten items reflecting student attitude toward testing. The majority of items required responses on a five-point scale: with 5 being strongly agree ranging to 1 being strongly disagree. Each student was asked to respond to 10 statements pertaining to their current beliefs about

assessments. Data collected from the third and fifth grade students were combined into one percentage score that reflected their general attitudes on testing. A brief overview of the results can be seen in Table 1. The complete survey can be found in the Appendix.

Table 1

Student Attitude Toward Testing

Statement	Agree %	No Opinion %	Disagree %
1. Too many tests per week	30	8	62
2. Grades comes from tests	35	22	33
3. Teacher prompts students	69	14	17
4. Good student, good score	13	14	73
5. Teacher gets nervous	19	31	50
6. Student gets nervous	72	13	15
7. Prior test practice	67	19	14
8. Tests affect teacher opinion	14	20	66
9. Teacher blame	10	6	84
10. False ability	64	16	20

The student survey elicited many interesting results. The statement in number three asserts, " Before a test, my teacher tells me what will be on the test." The response to this question indicates that students agree with the

assumption that teachers often use preparation strategies prior to testing. Some school districts provide teachers with scripted material to read to children prior to a lesson or test. This process often eliminates teacher and student creativity. These actions may also prohibit the students from developing critical thinking and problem solving skills needed for future success.

Item number five declares, "Before the standardized tests, my teacher gets nervous." The majority of responses affirm that the respondents disagree with the provided statement. This may suggest that teachers may have altered their daily teaching methods to include regular test preparation. Due to the increase in testing practices, students often fail to see any inconsistent behavior in their teachers during test time.

In statement number six, children were asked, " Before the standardized tests, I get nervous." According to the data collected in item six, it may be assumed that students are experiencing some form of anxiety prior to testing situations. Approximately 72% of the respondents agree with this statement, which may denote an overwhelming amount of pressure is being placed on child performance. Much of this pressure may come from the teachers, as well as the home.

The seventh item states, "My teacher makes me practice often before the standardized tests." More than half of the student population surveyed agreed that test preparations are done on a regular basis prior to standardized testing. Due to the pressures placed on schools and teachers for higher test scores, teachers might feel the need to increase daily test practice. Unfortunately this

may take a toll on students. It may be apparent that students notice the decrease in regular classroom learning and an increase in daily test drills.

Statement number eight asserts, " If I do badly on the test, my teacher will think I am not smart." Based on this survey, testing appears to have no adverse effects on student/teacher relationships. These finding suggest that students at the third and fifth grade level have not yet succumbed to the pressure of testing. Students continue to maintain a positive self-image with their teachers.

The children were asked in item nine, " It is my teacher's fault if I do not do well on my tests." The reported responses indicate that 84% disagree with the idea that it is the teacher's fault for student failure. It may be assumed that children feel responsible for academic failure. Even with the increased pressures students seem to realize that the full burden of academic success falls on their shoulders.

Item number ten declares, "I think I am smarter than what my test scores show." Apparently, many respondents believe that test results do not reflect their true academic capabilities. Over half of the student population agrees that these tests are not a true reflection of their ability, nor a fair tool of measurement. This statement is interesting primarily because not only teachers recognize the unfairness of high stakes testing, but students do, as well.

The findings from this student survey are consistent with the notion that heavy emphasis has been placed on student performance. This can seen through the high percentages noted in items three, six and seven. Student opinions solidify the assumptions that teachers have overemphasized current

assessment procedures. As the amount of assessment has increased, so have the consequences associated with student performance. Is it any wonder that students start to question their own self-worth? Consequently, do teachers start to re-evaluate their own best practices?

Table 2

Teacher Attitudes Toward Testing

Statement	Agree %	No Opinion %	Disagree %
1. Teaching changes	52	15	31
2. Standardized tests reflect ability	18	6	74
3. Curriculum tests reflect ability	43	12	43
4. Alternative tests measure ability.	87	6	6
5. Altered daily teaching schedule	77	12	9
6. Used distributed test material	59	18	21
7. Pressure from policy makers	74	12	12
8. Teacher responsibility	85	6	9
9. Teacher compensation	21	15	61
10. Diminished teaching time	61	15	21

Research shows that teachers are devoting an insurmountable amount of time to test preparation. When tests are the driving force behind instruction, teachers may deviate from their original teaching philosophies. Therefore, the

next survey was compiled to explore teacher's views on current assessment procedures. The findings are found in Table 2.

Item number one states, "Assessments change the way I teach." Over half of the teacher responses fell into the Agree category. These responses directly support our motive for evaluating this ever-growing problem. After analyzing these findings, one might conclude that pressures related to testing are directly affecting teachers.

Number four states, "Alternative assessment can measure a student's ability." There was a monumental 87% agreement to this component. It appears that teachers have a more positive attitude toward alternative assessments as opposed to formalized tests. Teachers may feel that alternative assessments are a more accurate evaluation technique for measuring student accomplishments. Table two may indicate that there may be a swing in the pendulum of educational reform.

Item number five, "If a test is impending, my daily schedule is altered to prepare for the test", also elicited interesting results. Once again, the majority of the respondents agreed with this statement. The researchers deciphered this high number to reiterate the assumption that teachers teach to the test. Since 77% of the teachers surveyed agreed with this statement, it may be safe to say that the practice of preparing students for tests is a common, daily procedure.

Statements six and seven assert, "I feel compelled to use administratively distributed test materials to prepare for tests", and "I feel pressure from policy makers to prepare students for assessments." Demographic differences may

have played a part in the broad range of responses, mainly because in one case study school, promotion policies are based exclusively on test scores. However, the majority still agreed that administratively distributed test materials are available and their use is strongly encouraged. It may be assumed that local school board members, administrators, or local officials believe they can fix academic problems with test preparation books and practice tests.

In number eight, teachers were asked to comment on this statement, "I feel responsible for the outcome of my students test performance." Although teachers do not necessarily place a heavy value on formalized testing, they almost certainly feel that student performance is their responsibility. This might lead to a sense of frustration and a lack of curriculum ownership. According to the survey, 85% of the teachers polled agreed to this statement. Are educators falling away from critical thinking methods of teaching and becoming a group of "test prep" teachers?

Item ten states " Test preparation diminishes time spent on "real" teaching." The push towards accountability may have driven teachers to extreme measures. The more time teachers spend preparing for and giving standardized tests, the less time they have to spend on "real" teaching. The kind of real teaching that can directly improve academic growth takes place in the classroom everyday.

Probable Causes

The literature suggests several underlying causes for emphasis on current assessment procedures affecting the way teachers teach. First, literature

shows that "more and more, test scores are used for accountability to make decisions about school accreditation, staff job security or pay, and student promotion and graduation" (On the Same Page, 2001). As the tests have become increasingly more important in lawmaker's eyes, the practice of teaching to the test has also increased dramatically. School personnel want students to succeed and reveal what they know on the tests. They also often feel pressure to use any means necessary to increase scores. "However, while families and the general public are demanding higher standards and higher scores, there is increasing concern, sometimes very vocally expressed, that the time and effort spent teaching to the test is educationally short changing students." (On the Same Page, 2001). Thus, teachers find themselves balancing the objective of high student scores against other educational needs, with student achievement being pulled in opposite directions.

Next, "both parents and educators often ascribe far too much precision and accuracy to students' scores on standardized achievement tests" (Popham, 1999, p.10). Unfortunately, many factors can occur to falsify scores. Some of these factors may include test anxiety, low socioeconomic status, bilingual students, absenteeism and various family issues. As distressing as this may appear, students enter the schools burdened with problems that teachers have no control over. In other words, no matter how much teachers teach to the test, the end result may still be the same.

"Accountability through testing for students, teachers, and administrators is the key leverage point for policymakers seeking to promote educational

reform" (Hoffman, et al., 2001). One may conclude that policy makers are pushing standardized tests in an attempt to gain public trust and support. This then leads to the public believing that standardized tests are a valid form of evaluating student performance. Teachers are caught between standards and tests. They are left to align classroom practices to meet the demands around them.

Finally, "when political pressure and media tension attach high stakes to test results, scores can become inflated thus giving a false impression of student achievement" (Shepard, 1991,). When looking at the scores, it seems as though more affluent areas receive higher marks. It hard to believe that so many children from high socioeconomic families are considered so much smarter than those children in a low socioeconomic families, Standardized tests fail to acknowledge the differences in background knowledge and experiences. This may lead to more pressure on these teachers and students, "In low socioeconomic (SES) schools, more attention is given to test scores. Teachers in low SES schools pay more attention to tests in planning their instruction and give more time to test preparation, even though teachers in these schools are more apt to question the fairness of tests and to see test scores as beyond their control" (Bracey, 1994).

In summary, there are many causes for the emphasis on current assessment procedures affecting the ways teachers teach. When teachers succumb to the pressure of current practices, they might endanger or compromise excellence in teaching. As educators, our ultimate goal is to teach children to be independent thinkers and problem solvers. Unfortunately,

standardized test practices may stifle teacher's creativity to achieve this goal effectively. Educators are expected to forget the balanced curriculum and the academically well-rounded student. "What gets tested is what gets taught" (Lewis, 1999, p.179).

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The guiding force behind assessment in the past had been to determine a student's academic performance with regard to reading, writing, and arithmetic. However in today's society, students and teachers want more out of education. It is the researcher's belief that the educational process should be about self-discovery and understanding the importance of independent, self-guided free thinking. Unfortunately, the current emphasis on assessment has halted this process and has placed students under siege. Decision-making has been taken out of the teacher's hands and placed in the hands of legislators. If we are to fully answer this question, we must first understand how assessment is defined. Assessment in educational settings is a multifaceted process that involves far more than the administration of a test. Assessment is a process of collecting data for the purpose of making decisions about individuals and groups (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1998).

Trying to identify which assessments are best is a difficult task. In the subject of reading alone, one can find an overabundance of alternative assessments. For example, there are informal reading inventories; running

records; concepts about print tests; assessments for emergent literacy; tests for book-handling knowledge; miscue analysis; portfolios; conference guides; anecdotal records; guides for evaluating metacognitive awareness; holistic and analytic evaluations of writing; interview, attitude, and disposition surveys; retellings; basic skills tests; decoding skills test; comprehension checklists; spelling checklists; vocabulary tests; student self-assessment of reading and writing; observational checklists for reading and writing; checklists and surveys for parents; literacy profiles; language records; developmental skills for emergent reading and writing; performance tasks; rubrics; bench marks for literacy; instruments for placing students in programs; instruments for taking students out of programs; and methods for teacher to evaluate the teaching of literacy. In addition to these alternative test forms, the educational field has numerous performance-based assessments. Subsequently, educators use standardized tests, diagnostic tests, norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced tests, constructed-response tests, psycho-educational batteries, achievement tests, minimum-competency testing, group tests, individual tests, graduation examinations, or college entrance examinations, all of which involve the assessment of literacy (Gambrell, et al., 1998).

Since a Nation at Risk was published in 1983, educators have been continually bombarded with the word "test" and the various euphemisms for it. However, the assessment process started long before this study was ever published. Students in United States schools have been described as the most

tested in the world (Resnick & Resnick, 1985). In fact, assessments in schools have steadily increased since the origins of public education.

In 1845, Horace Mann and his confidante, Samuel Gridley Howe, "recognized that school by school test results would give them political leverage over recalcitrant headmasters" (Ramirez, 1999, p. 204). In other words, the "top-down" pressures were applied in schools over a century ago and seem to still be occurring today. Today's society seems to observe the same policy strategies being employed for very similar reasons.

In the early 1900s, literal comprehension and speed were the elements most easily measured by objective tests, and, therefore, tended to define the act of reading. In 1915, Daniel Starch measured what he considered to be the essential elements in reading as the comprehension and speed of the material read, and the correctness of the pronunciation. During that time, comprehension often meant factual recall or reproduction requiring the ownership of what some called "mirror minds" (Barry, 1998). For example, a student retold as much of a story as could be recalled and each word correctly remembered was counted accurately. Success hinged on the notion that factual recall must be done verbatim.

In contrast to Starch's beliefs, Thorndike's 1918 piece "Reading is Reasoning," began to examine the thought process that transpires during reading comprehension. In fact, Thorndike was considered the "Father of Educational Measurement." His quest was to better understand the act of comprehension

rather than total recall. In 1921, he deeply criticized the newly developed standardized tests. "It will be said that learning should be for the learning's sake, that too much attention is given already in this country to marks, prizes, degrees and the like, that students work too much for marks rather than for real achievement" as cited by Mabry (1999, p. 5). It is at this time, the researchers believed that the first methodical attempts to denote reading ability by measuring comprehension date back to the early 1900s.

Obviously, reading comprehension measurement was very new as education moved into the first half of the Twentieth Century. During this time, tests were used as components of efficiency where educators used objective test scores exclusively to make decisions regarding student placement. "In the 1950s and 1960s, we added commercially developed, norm-referenced, districtwide standardized testing programs in an effort to achieve local accountability" (Stiggins,1999, p.192). Pearson (1998) states that during this period, the purpose of the test was to tell how well a student did in relation to a national sample of scores. Technological advancements during the 1950s also brought about the use of high-speed optical scanners. "This technology sealed the eminence of the multiple choice item for the next 35 years"(Madaus, et al., 1999, p. 693). During the mid-to-late '60s, Bloom and Gagne brought forth criterion-referenced assessment. Criterion-reference assessment judges students based on their mastery of a particular subject. Unfortunately, criterion-referenced tests may eliminate independent freethinking similar to that of the norm-referenced tests. "The idea was that if we could just be more precise about

the essential elements involved in learning any particular domain or process, we could bring most, if not all, students to higher levels of achievement" (Pearson, 1998, p. 98). This concept meant that teachers should parallel their teaching to the test.

"The current frenzied interest in testing is motivated by a desire to improve public education. Policy makers believe that, by setting standards and measuring attainment, they will spur teachers to teach better and students learn more" (Shepard, 1991, p. 232). This same thinking is what spawned the statewide testing program that began in the 1970s. At the onset of this decade, educators started with three statewide assessments. Currently these assessments number nearly 40, where virtually every state has at least one or more. During the 1970s, minimum competency tests were used to assess whether students had attained a desired level of reading skill in order to perform tasks encountered in life. Minimum competency tests were also used in making pass/fail decisions regarding graduation. Educators were being swept into what is now being called the educational accountability movement.

"In the 1970s and 1980s we implemented a national assessment program. In the 1980s and 1990s, we have discovered the political power of international assessment. Recent reports of ...results in the media have led to worries that we had better raise our standing among the nations of the world or risk social and economic decay" (Stiggins, 1999, p.192). Standardized multiple choice testing came under criticism in the late 1980s and the movement for "new" and "authentic" assessment gained momentum. Regardless of the research

supporting the new and authentic assessments, in 1994 the United States signed into law the "Goals 2000: The Educate America Act" which contains specific provisions for states to develop high educational standards and to use tests to measure the extent to which students meet the standards. The Improving America's Schools Act, signed into law in 1996, calls for schools to assess and report on the progress for all students. It appears that many states have abandoned the issue of quality assessment, and has gone back down a path previously traveled. These may be indicators of why high-stakes testing is being used today

Our students are tested to an extent that is unprecedented in American history and unparalleled anywhere in the world. Politicians and businesspeople, determined to get tough with students and teachers, have increased the pressure to raise standardized test scores (Kohn, 2000). Unfortunately, the effort to do so typically comes at the expense of more meaningful forms of learning.

Due to these pressures, many teachers may be teaching to the test instead of more meaningful skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. In fact, the term "teaching to the test" usually means the practice of using a state-mandated test as a guide in deciding what to teach and how to teach it. These high-stake pressures may directly affect elementary school teachers and students who must cope with the expectations of policy-makers.

Having examined assessment from a historical perspective, it is apparent that the assessment issue continues to be heavily debated. Pearson (1998,

p.101) notes that "getting to the fundamental processes of comprehension as they occur in the mind has remained a sort of 'Holy Grail' for comprehension researchers throughout this century. Even though it eludes us, we continue in our quest to find it." In an attempt to reach this point, test creators have tried to develop assessment tools that allow someone to make a appropriate inference about the knowledge and/or skills that a student possesses in a specific content area (Popham, 1999). They believe that this information could be used for a variety of appropriate guides to address the needs of different audiences. These may include students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policy makers.

One must understand the larger issues in education and educational reform because educators often find themselves torn between assessment for accountability and the need for assessment to improve instruction. Assessments can be helpful in a variety of ways. Students may become more self-reflective and self-motivated over their own academic performance. Teachers might begin to focus their instruction more effectively. They could also follow a student's growth in a certain subject area over time. Educators also can determine which students are eligible for special services such as Title 1, or programs for the gifted and special education. These test results could also be very informative to parents and educators by identifying a student's strengths and weaknesses. Parents might begin to better understand more about their children's progress as learners and subsequently use this information to provide at-home assistance. Administrators could possibly use this information to understand how groups of students in their schools are progressing. Legislators and citizens might

understand how groups of students across the state or nation are progressing and policy makers may monitor the implementation and effectiveness of various reform initiatives (Gambrell, et al., 1999).

Throughout history, assessments have grown and changed in many ways. There are many uses and misuses in assessments that can be found today. What is the answer to this perplexing question? It is the researchers' belief that the most effective practices in literacy assessment are those that occur in the classroom between a competent teacher and a confident student.

For this study, a series of interviews were conducted to find more information about pressures placed upon teachers. The researchers interviewed several teachers, administrators, local school board members, and parents to gather their views on this subject. These findings, together with insights, attempt to clarify the question of whether assessments affect the way educators teach.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF GATHERED DATA

Do current assessment procedures affects the way teachers teach? The researchers' purpose was to explore the relationship between instruction and the emphasis placed on current assessment procedures. Using a historical perspective, the researchers examined the role assessments have played in education. Currently, assessment procedures have escalated to new heights. This realization has led many to question today's assessment procedures.

Existence of this problem became evident through the use of teacher and student surveys, historical research, and personal interviews. Together these components may help the populace to understand the extent to which assessment has affected society today. To further illustrate the existence of this problem, the researchers examined relevant literature.

Literature suggests that educational reform is based on students' scores on standardized assessments. The current interest in testing is motivated by a desire to improve education. Policy makers believe that, by testing standards and calculating attainment, they will spur teachers to teach better and encourage students to learn more. The increased assessment practices have created

tension in some circles, though. There is increasing concern that the time and effort spent teaching to the test is short-changing students' academic growth. Due to this predicament, teachers feel torn in numerous directions.

The purpose of the research was to decide if the emphasis on current assessment procedures affects the way teachers teach. Through the research, such as surveys and literature, concerns were noted. To further delve into the issues of teachers teaching to the test, a random assortment of teachers, administrators, local school board members, and parents were interviewed. By doing so, the subjects were free to express their thoughts and feelings about test preparation. They also discussed the ramifications of current testing practices as observed in their schools.

Being wrought with much of the pressures to have their students attain high-test scores, the teachers seemed to feel numerous burdens. Many teachers felt that they were giving up too much of their regular instruction prior to standardized test administration. An underlying cause for pressure placed on current assessment procedures may be that test scores are published for the public to see and judge. All too often, schools are pitted against each other to determine their worth. For many schools, much is at stake. For example, some schools may be put on academic probation, teacher salaries are affected, student promotion may be determined, and school funding may be linked to test scores.

The teacher component of our interviews brought about an abundance of comments. In one of the case study schools, a fifth grade teacher noted that all

teachers were given at least six test preparation books for each student. The entire school population was strongly urged to participate in an after school program for the direct test preparation of reading and math. The use of materials and classes were strongly urged for students and teachers. The teacher interviewed claimed to "resent" the additional overemphasis of test preparation, the increased workload, and the pressures placed on her students. She added that instead of just focusing on reading and math, schools should concentrate more on the curriculum, rather than just test-taking skills.

"I canceled all other things to teach geometry because geometry is a major component (of the test)," a fifth grade teacher reported. Another teacher was noted as saying that she stopped teaching her regular curriculum in language arts in order to do only essay writing. "We feel like robots with no room for personality," said a fourth grade teacher. During this round table discussion, many teachers became quite vocal on the topic of pressures placed upon teachers and the need to teach to the test. They obviously felt an overwhelming sense of obligation to achieve high scores. They seemed to be pulled in many directions to get this job done, yet their cries seem to fall on deaf ears. Teachers are of the belief that local officials only care about raising test scores. These opinions are but a few that support the notion that teachers feel much pressure to teach to the tests.

Although many teachers support the previous ideas, some still practice the old "drill-and-kill" method of teaching to the test. In fact, another teacher firmly believed that the constant repetition of "factoids" is a true and appropriate way to

teach. She did not believe that she taught to the test because, to her, this method helped to raise her scores. She thought that this was an accurate measure of her students' academic growth. She was able to support her ideologies because many administrators often praised her for these accomplishments in the past.

The next group of professionals interviewed included administrators. Administrators very often, are faced with a dilemma. They have to answer to numerous people, but they also need to be true to their own personal philosophies. One principal believes that assessment has its roles. They have to parallel the school's curriculum in order to be useful. A vice-principal had similar views. This administrator believed that assessments are good, but too much weight is placed on student promotion. He voiced the concern that the standardized assessments "lessen teacher input" within classroom curriculum. This administrator subsequently believed that content areas are put on the back burner for test preparation. Although these administrators have their own convictions on this subject, they often feel that they must abide by concerns of policy makers.

Two local school board members were asked to discuss their views on formal assessments. Both members agreed that the major topic at the school board meeting was standardized testing. They discussed the dates of the tests and the monetary allotment that would be necessary for supplemental test preparation material. The school board members believed that pretest materials were the answer to prepare the children for the standardized tests. It was

intimated through this discussion that most board members agreed that standardized tests truly reflect student performance. Once again these ideas solidify the notion that too much pressure is placed upon test preparation.

Parents were the final group interviewed regarding their opinions on standardized testing. Although parents do not deal directly with the tests, they have many concerns of their own. They feel helpless in their inability to assist their child emotionally and academically for these tests. One parent noted that they feel paralyzed because their child is under such tremendous stress. They often feel unable to relieve his/her anxiety.

Parents seem to be questioning the validity of the tests by asking, "What good are these tests? How are they helping my child?" This statement shows the researchers that some parents may be unclear as to the true purpose of standardized testing. These types of questions need to be addressed by schools if this yearly assessment practice continues.

Unfortunately, some other parents place additional pressures on the students as they buy into the standardized testing phenomenon. One father even went so far as to say that he was "embarrassed" that his child repeated a grade due to the promotion policy in this school district. According to this policy, students must pass the tests in order to be promoted to the next grade level. Students must endure family pressures, as well.

Standardized tests affect many different people in a variety of ways. Pressure is put upon local school board members, administrators, parents, and teachers. Although standardized assessments have become a national concern,

the predominant weight of this problem still seems to fall back on the teacher. This may be the ultimate reason why teachers teach to the test.

The research has shown that standardized testing in schools had an effect on academic freedom and growth. Why limit ourselves to filling in bubbles on test forms when numerous alternative assessments are commercially available? Educators need to spend more time exploring these assessments that will promote productive teachers and students.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Assessment procedures have recently become a major topic for discussion. This research was conducted in an attempt to uncover the biases and misuses of current assessment procedures.

As a result of this project, many conclusions may be drawn. First, many teachers are teaching to the test. Many teachers find it necessary to teach skills directly related to standardized tests because many schools fear academic probation and some teachers fear for their jobs. This time spent preparing students for the tests greatly diminishes quality instruction that is needed when developing critical thinking and problem solving.

The workload teachers face on a daily basis has increased. This is due partly to the need to prepare students for standardized testing. Not only do teachers need to fulfill district curriculum requirements, but prior to test time, teachers are also expected to instruct students in test-taking skills. Very often, teachers feel that student scores are a direct reflection of their performance as

educators. Unfortunately, much of this pressure stems from outside influences rather than personal convictions.

Some of the external pressures include policy-makers who follow a top-down approach to education. Basically, this approach begins with the national officials, trickles down the political ladder, and finally ends up on the teacher's desk. At this point, the teacher feels limited in creativity and effectiveness, while trying to appease policy makers.

Teachers experience pressure from numerous directions, and this pressure is being transferred to students, as well. Consequently, the time spent on test preparation, may have led students to conclude that their test scores were very important. This led to an increase in test anxiety and nervousness. As a result, when teachers teach to the test, students may be negatively affected.

Historically, the emphasis placed on assessment has been a major topic for discussion. For years, researchers have been looking for a qualitative form of assessment that accurately reflects student performance. To date, the search is ongoing and in the meantime, the struggles of teachers and students continue.

Recommendations

Decades of school reform have shown that what matters most is a bottom-up policy approach to education. Instead of having policy makers controlling the assessment strategies, control needs to be given back to teachers. Both individually and collectively, teachers need to be more actively involved in assessment decisions, rather than following guidelines set by policy-makers who are not trained educators. When teachers are given back the power to make

academic decisions, many changes may take place. Teachers may become the guiding force to improve curriculum, and they can also make professional judgments on what students need.

The surveys showed that teachers are halting regular classroom instruction to prepare students for upcoming standardized tests. This break in the regular teaching schedule leads the researchers to believe that assessments do not parallel or support general curriculums. Therefore, school districts need to take time to re-evaluate assessment decisions and examine alternative assessments that directly parallel their curriculum. This would give a more accurate measure of student performance.

Currently, there is an abundance of assessments available to educators. However, some districts seem to limit themselves to only a few that do not always necessarily reflect the school's curriculum. Some alternative assessments, though, reflect actual and worthwhile experiences that occur in a meaningful learning environment. For example, school districts may want to examine performance tasks requiring students to demonstrate what they know and demonstrate what they are able to do. Portfolios are another option. These could contain samples of work that the students consider to be their best efforts. In addition, teachers can gather information about their students through observation. Anecdotal records, developmental checklists, and other forms of observation may be useful in tracking student performance.

To further support the belief that assessment should parallel and support the curriculum, the researchers believe that money normally spent on

standardized assessments would be better spent using authentic assessments. After gathering, reviewing, and assessing the needs of the school district, the funds could be redirected toward the implementation of worthwhile activities. These may include teacher workshops, courses, materials, hiring of consultants that both teachers and principals request, or meeting the need for additional staff. These are all components of a productive school district.

Finally, the public needs to be educated about the purpose of these tests. Too often, the public looks at published standardized test scores to compare schools or school districts. This should not be the case. The people need to be informed that the purposes of testing are to follow a child's development and to improve a school's curriculum.

Evidence in this report has clearly shown that the emphasis on current assessment procedures affects the way teachers teach. The existence of this problem has been proven through teacher and student surveys, historical literature, and personal interviews. Although some current approaches to assessments have become idle, opportunities can be developed where students will gain ownership of and insight about their own learning, thus providing teachers with a rich basis for making professional judgments about instruction. Although changes in standardized testing slow, teachers must be urged to push forward and make the changes needed for successful education reform.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT SURVEY

Name (optional)_____Grade_____

Please choose the best answer to the question. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. Your answer will in no way effect your grade. Thank you for your cooperation.
Mrs. Bickham, Ms. Burns and Mrs. Monahan.

Scale: Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

1. I believe my teacher(s) give too many tests per week.
   5 4 3 2 1

2. My report card grade comes from tests taken in class.
   5 4 3 2 1

3. Before a test, my teacher tells me what will be on the test.
   5 4 3 2 1

4. Only smart students do well on tests.
   5 4 3 2 1

5. Before the Standardized Tests (ITBS, ISAT, CAT), my teacher gets nervous.
   5 4 3 2 1

6. Before the Standardized Tests (ITBS, ISAT, CAT), I get nervous.
   5 4 3 2 1

7. My teacher makes me practice often before the Standardized Test (ITBS, ISAT, and CAT).
   5 4 3 2 1

8. If I do badly on a test, my teacher will think I am not smart.
   5 4 3 2 1

9. It is my teacher's fault if I do not do well on a test.
   5 4 3 2 1

10. I think I am smarter than what my test scores show.
    5 4 3 2 1

APPENDIX B

TEACHER SURVEY

Teacher Position_____Years of Experience_____

Please choose the best answer to the questions. Your answers will only be used for research purposes and your names will not be disclosed in anyway. Please answer as honestly as possible. We truly appreciate your support. Thank you.
Tracy Bickham, Patti Burns, and Dorothy Monahan

Scale:	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	5	4	3	2	1

1. Assessments change the way I teach.
   5 4 3 2 1

2. Standardized Tests (ITBS, ISAT, CAT, etc.) show a true reflection of a student's ability.
   5 4 3 2 1

3. Test (curriculum based) results are a direct reflection of a student's ability.
   5 4 3 2 1

4. Alternative assessments can measure a student's ability. (i.e. open-ended response, written essays, performance events, student exhibitions, or portfolios)
   5 4 3 2 1

5. If a test is impending, my daily teaching schedule is altered to prepare for that test.
   5 4 3 2 1

6. I feel compelled to use administratively distributed test materials to prepare for tests.
   5 4 3 2 1

7. I feel pressure from policy makers (Local School Council, City, State, and Federal) to prepare students for assessments.
   5 4 3 2 1

8. I feel responsible for the outcome of my students test performance.
   5 4 3 2 1

9. I believe teachers should be compensated for the student's high performances on tests.
   5 4 3 2 1

10. Test preparation diminishes time spent on <u>real</u> teaching.
    5 4 3 2 1

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